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ABSTRACT

Although most business instructors acknowledge the desirability of having their students understand business subcultures, few of them develop such understanding in their classes. A nine-step instructional method was developed to remedy this situation. During step one the stage is set by discussing key culture-related concepts. During step two small groups of class members interpret selected business-related proverbs, maxims, and sayings and identify the underlying values and assumptions. During step three the small groups identify alternative values and assumptions from the perspective of one or more other business subcultures. Types of messages that are apt to be influenced when the values and assumptions identified in the preceding two steps are in conflict are identified during step four. At the beginning of step five, the small groups form one large group to share their deliberations and to record key information on the matrix outline that the instructor provides. During step six the instructor reviews key information about business subcultures. During step seven the students read and formulate responses to the questions that accompany a cross-cultured vignette. The students discuss the vignette-related questions in depth during step eight. During step nine the instructor presents useful generalizations about business subcultures. (Four exhibits are included.) (Author/MG)

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HELPING STUDENTS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND
BUSINESS SUBCULTURES:
AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO FACILITATE CROSS-CULTURAL
BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Although most business instructors acknowledge the desirability of having their students understand business subcultures, few of them develop such understanding in their classes. To remedy this omission, a nine-step instructional method, which can be completed in two to three hours, is presented. During Step One the stage is set by discussing key culture-related concepts. During Step Two small groups of class members interpret selected business-related proverbs, maxims, and sayings and identify the underlying values and assumptions. During Step Three the small groups identify alternate values and assumptions from the perspective of one or more other business subcultures. Types of messages that are apt to be influenced when the values and assumptions identified in the preceding two steps are in conflict are identified during Step Four. At the beginning of Step Five, the small groups form one large group to share their deliberations and to record key information on the matrix outline that the instructor has provided. During Step Six the instructor reviews key information about business subcultures. During Step Seven the students read and formulate responses to the questions that accompany a cross-cultured vignette. The students discuss the vignette-related questions in depth during Step Eight. During Step Nine the instructor presents useful generalizations about business subcultures.

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Helping Students to Better Understand Business Subcultures:
An Effective Way to Facilitate Cross-Cultural Business Communication

Understanding business subcultures is increasingly important as businesspersons communicate with and engage in commerce with their counterparts from other countries. Without better understanding of their own and other business subcultures, the globally deaf, blind, and dumb businesspersons of the United States of America will continue their ethnocentric ways, which jeopardize their success in the competitive international marketplace. This insensitivity to other business subcultures can be remedied by providing effective cross-cultural business education.

While most instructors of business subjects acknowledge the desirability of having their students understand business subcultures, few of them actually teach about business subcultures in their own classes for a variety of reasons. First, most business teachers are concerned about the traditional course topics they must abbreviate or omit in order to develop business subculture-related insights. Second, some business teachers view the development of understanding about business subcultures as too time-consuming to incorporate into their classes. Third, business teachers sometimes perceive business subcultures to be too complex to attempt to teach. Fourth, most business teachers perceive themselves as poorly informed about cultural aspects of business, with few, if any, ideas about how to develop insights regarding business subcultures. Simply stated, few instructors of business subjects overcome the litany of excuses and make the development of

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understanding about business subcultures a high enough priority for inclusion in their classes.

If instructors of business subjects had a simple, effective method for developing better understanding of business subcultures that required only a few hours of class time, then perhaps more business teachers would attempt--and succeed in--the development of these increasingly important understandings. The purpose of this paper, then, is to suggest an efficient method that business teachers can use to develop better understanding of business subcultures and their effects on cross-cultural business communication.

The Teaching Method

The suggested teaching method, which uses business-related proverbs, maxims, and sayings to develop insights into the values and assumptions of the business subculture of the United States of America and one or more other business subcultures, can be implemented in two to three hours of class time and is particularly well-suited for use in business communication and management courses. The method accommodates either culture-general or culture-specific instruction regarding other business subcultures while involving students in both small-group and large-group discussions. During the large-group discussion, the students complete a matrix outline that records the assumptions of the selected business subcultures and the types of impacted business communication messages. After a review of the key information in the matrix outline, the students apply selected key concepts as they analyze and discuss a realistic vignette involving communication between businesspersons from different business subcultures. The method concludes with the presentation of useful generalizations about values and assumptions and communication in business subcultures.

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The remainder of this article describes the suggested teaching method step by step.

Step One: Set the stage by discussing key culture-related concepts.

Perhaps the most efficient way to begin the instruction is for the instructor to provide relevant background information through lecture and discussion involving all of the students. Two key ideas about culture that should be addressed are that culture is the composite of past experiences and that as individuals mature, they acquire the knowledges, beliefs, values, assumptions, and morals of their cultures.

Important ideas about business subcultures that the instructor should emphasize are that business subcultures are subsets of general cultures, sets of experiences shared by those who engage in business transactions; that business subcultures select from but do not contradict allowable behaviors within their respective general cultures; that business subcultures typically are shrouded in secrecy and implicit in the beliefs, customs, management practices, and lifestyles of businesspersons; and that because of secrecy, understanding of business subcultures is often haphazardly assimilated throughout entire lifetimes, resulting in most people's having insufficient understanding of the cultural framework in which business transactions take place.¹

The instructor should also address the influences of business subcultures on business communications, the means by which business is accomplished. The following ideas are ones that the instructor should develop. When businesspersons communicate, they typically assume that others perceive, judge, think, and reason as they do. When communication occurs between persons with the same subcultural or general cultural background, it tends to be successful and relatively easy to accomplish because of the many shared

values and assumptions. When the communicators have less familiarity with the values and assumption of each other's subcultures, successful communication is more difficult to achieve; there may be communication conflicts and barriers to communication. The effects of subcultural conditioning are so pervasive that businesspersons frequently experience major difficulties when interacting with their counterparts from other business subcultures, who communicate on the bases of differing sets of values and assumptions.²

Consequently, businesspersons need to understand their own subculture, the learned, shared, unifying, and interrelated values and assumptions that serve as the foundation for their business practices and that shape their business-related attitudes. When familiar with their own subculture and its unwritten code of conduct, businesspersons better understand their own subcultural conditioning and subsequently its influence on their communicative behaviors. In other words, they are aware of their subcultural baggage, the business-related values and assumptions, that they bring to interactions with others. By recognizing similarities and differences between their subcultural baggage and that of those with whom they communicate, businesspersons can adjust their interactive behaviors to minimize conflict and barriers to communication.

One way to develop insights into business subcultures is to examine their proverbs, maxims, and sayings. Proverbs, maxims, and sayings are short, pithy expressions that contain useful--sometimes profound--ideas. They have been used by various cultural groups for centuries to preserve and transmit valued guidelines to succeeding generations. Likewise, many of the values--the standards against which behaviors are judged--and assumptions--suppositions taken for granted--of business subcultures are conveyed in business-related proverbs, maxims, and sayings.

Research by McCallister and Bates provides some support for this: They concluded after studying themes found in stories of American and German business managers that "recurring themes present in the language of managers are indicative of culturally based managerial values" and that "the nature of recurring themes differ from culture to culture."³ Consequently, it seems likely that insights into the business subculture of the United States of America--and other business subcultures through comparing and contrasting--can be developed by studying the pearls of wisdom--the proverbs, maxims, and sayings--that its members have valued, preserved, and shared over time.

Step Two: Interpret selected proverbs, maxims, and sayings and identify their underlying values and assumptions.

The instructor divides the class into small groups of four to six persons and asks each group (1) to interpret from the perspective of the business subculture of the United States of America the one or two business-related proverbs, maxims, and sayings that are being distributed exclusively to the group on 3- x 5-inch cards and (2) to identify the values and assumptions underlying the proverbs, maxims, and sayings. If some class members are international students, the instructor should disperse them into as many different small groups as possible; the international students can provide valuable cross-cultural perspectives, especially about other business subcultures, during Steps Three and Five. The instructor should give the small groups several minutes to discuss their own proverbs, maxims, and sayings before proceeding with Step Three.

Exhibit 1 provides some appropriate well-known and less well-known business-related proverbs, maxims, and sayings with their commonplace wordings. Instructors who object to the sexist language used in the traditional wordings can edit the proverbs, maxims, and sayings to remove the

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EXHIBIT 1. SOME WELL-KNOWN AND LESS WELL-KNOWN
PROVERBS, MAXIMS, AND SAYINGS THAT REFLECT VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS
OF THE BUSINESS SUBCULTURE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Where there is a will, there is a way.

A man can move a mountain.

I think I'm doing all right because the boss hasn't criticized me in two or three months.

If you are like a wheelbarrow, going no further than you are pushed, then don't apply for work here.

The pathway to hell is paved with good intentions.

Time is money.

If you lose your time, you cannot get money or gain.

Competition makes a horse race.

Business is king.

No man can serve two masters.

There's always room at the top.

An office boy can rise to become a company president.

As you sow, so you reap.

Even the best of friends must part.

Figures don't lie, but liars figure.

Everyone is entitled to an opinion.

Good counsel has no price.

A person must be willing to get his hands dirty.

The end justifies the means.

Change brings life.

offending words; for example, a man can move a mountain could be reworded as a person can move a mountain. All of the listed expressions reflect values and assumptions that are associated with the business subculture of the United States of America. Nevertheless, the instructor should remind the students that because of individual differences, a minority of the members of a subculture may not fully ascribe to the values and assumptions of the majority of the members of that subculture.

Step Three: Identify alternative values and assumptions.

Next the instructor asks the small groups to identify alternate values and assumptions that may be held by businesspersons from other subcultures. If the small groups can associate the differing values and assumptions with the business subcultures of specific countries, then so much the better since that information can be shared with the entire class during Step Five. During Step Three international students can share valuable information about the business subcultures of their native countries and about others with which they have familiarity. The instructor should give the small groups several minutes to ponder and discuss the values and assumptions that may be somewhat or entirely different from those that are implicit in their assigned proverbs, maxims, and sayings.

Step Four: Identify types of messages that are apt to be influenced when the identified values and assumptions are in conflict.

At this point the instructor asks the small groups to identify the types of business communication messages that are apt to be influenced when the values and assumptions that have been identified in Steps Two and Three are in direct conflict. The goal here is for students to link certain business-related values and assumptions with specific types of business communication

messages that are apt to be impacted. This step will take several minutes to complete.

Step Five: Share the deliberations of the small groups with the large group and record the key information on the matrix outline.

The instructor merges the small groups into one large group and distributes copies of a matrix outline for completion during Step Five activities. Then the instructor asks one small group to share its perceptions regarding the meaning and the values and assumptions that are implicit in its business-related proverb, maxim, or saying. Next the instructor solicits reactions from the members of the large group and strives toward consensus. When general agreement exists among the class members, the instructor directs the small group to continue by presenting and then seeking reactions to alternate values and assumptions that may be held by persons from other business subcultures. Whenever possible, group members should associate specific business values and assumptions with specific business subcultures. The instructor should encourage students from other countries to share their valuable cross-cultural perspectives at this point. The instructor may also need to be an active participant during this step by supplying needed information about specific business subcultures.⁴ Next the instructor directs the small group to share for discussion purposes its list of types of impacted business communication messages. When the discussion diminishes, the instructor calls on another small group, and the process is repeated until all small groups have presented their proverbs, maxims, and sayings and discussed the business communication-related implications in front of the large group.

During the presentations and discussions, the class members complete their individual copies of the matrix outline that the instructor has provided. The matrix outline may have such columnar headings as "Proverbs,

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Maxims, and Sayings," "Assumptions of the Business Subculture of the United States of America," "Assumptions of Other Business Subcultures" if the culture-general approach is being used or "Assumptions of the Business Subculture of (fill-in-the-blank)" if the culture-specific approach is being used, and "Types of Impacted Business Communication Messages." The matrix outline serves as an effective device for organizing and summarizing key dimensions of values and assumptions in business subcultures in a tabular form; furthermore, the matrix outline shows relationships among these dimensions. Exhibit 2 shows how a section of a completed culture-specific matrix outline might look during the Step Five activities.

Step Six: Review the key information about business subcultures.

During Step Six the instructor summarizes the key information from the preceding small-group presentations and large-group discussions. The instructor reiterates the identified mainstream values and assumptions of the business subcultures of the United States of America and one or more other countries, as well as how values and assumptions influence various types of business communication messages. The instructor emphasizes that although the values and assumptions of business subcultures vary, they affect overtly or covertly all of the communications that are sent and received by businesspersons.

Step Seven: Formulate responses to the questions that accompany the cross-cultural vignette.

At this point the instructor distributes to the large group a realistic vignette that depicts communication between persons from two different business subcultures and asks the group to read silently the vignette and to formulate responses to the questions following the vignette. The instructor

EXHIBIT 2. DIMENSIONS OF VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS IN TWO BUSINESS SUBCULTURES

Proverbs, Maxims, and Sayings	Assumptions of the Business Subculture of the United States of America	Assumptions of the Business Subculture of Saudi Arabia	Types of Impacted Business Communication Messages
Where there is a will, there is a way. A man can move a mountain.	Businesspersons influence their own futures and environ- ments.	Businesspersons do not influence the future, which is determined by Allah; businesspersons should adjust to the environment rather than alter it.	Planning and schedul- ing activities; negotiating and bargaining activities.

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should allow several minutes for reading and contemplating. Exhibit 3 shows an appropriate type of vignette and related questions that will stimulate understanding regarding how the information about business subcultural values and assumptions can be applied in practical ways.

Step Eight: Discuss the questions that accompany the vignette in depth.

Next the instructor involves the large group in a discussion of the selected vignette and related questions. Exhibit 4 shows suggested responses to the questions that are found at the end of Exhibit 3. The suggested responses are provided to help the instructor derive maximum learning value from the vignette-related discussion. The instructor finishes Step Eight by summarizing the key information from the large-group discussion of the vignette.

Step Nine: Present useful generalizations about business subcultures.

The instructor concludes the instruction by presenting useful generalizations about the values and assumptions of business subcultures that the students should remember. Among them are these generalizations:

1. Each business subculture has its own unique set of values and assumptions.
2. Each member of a business subculture tends to operate on the basis of his or her subculture's set of values and assumptions.
3. Each member of a business subculture needs to be aware of the subcultural baggage, the values and assumptions, that he or she brings to every business interaction.
4. Each member of a business subculture needs to be aware of the subcultural baggage, the values and assumptions, that other participants bring to every business interaction.

EXHIBIT 3. A VIGNETTE DEPICTING CONFLICTING
BUSINESS SUBCULTURAL VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

It is springtime. An exchange is taking place in a Middle Eastern city between Jim, a 43-year-old aviation equipment representative from Chicago, and Abdul, a 41-year-old governmental administrator who oversees the modernization of aviation equipment and facilities in his country.

Abdul: What brings you here during Ramadan, our holy fast?

Jim: I know--I know this is an important time for you, but I've got problems--major problems. Nothing's working right--nothing's getting done! We're behind schedule on the installation of the new collision-avoidance equipment. It's been setting in the customs warehouse for three weeks--23 days to be exact. I can't even get it delivered. Besides, I don't see how we can possibly have the traffic alert collision avoidance system installed in the aircraft and ready to use by the date we agreed. That is going to make my boss back home really unhappy. It may even cost me a promotion. In the meantime, your countrymen are being deprived of the safest flights possible. Abdul, can't you do something to help me?

Abdul: My friend, do not be concerned. Be patient. My people have waited many years for safer flights. They can wait a few months longer. That is Allah's will. Fast. Purify your soul.

1. What business subcultural values and assumptions of the United States of America did Jim bring to the exchange as subcultural baggage?
2. What business subcultural values and assumptions of the Middle East did Abdul bring to the exchange as subcultural baggage?
3. If Jim had realized the potential impact of conflicting business subcultural values and assumptions before the exchange took place, how might he have altered his business communication plans?
4. How important do you think it is in the Islamic Middle East to avoid substantive business exchanges during time periods with special religious significance? What in the exchange leads you to this generalization regarding the Muslim culture?

EXHIBIT 4. SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO A VIGNETTE
DEPICTING CONFLICTING BUSINESS SUBCULTURAL VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

1. Jim brings a number of the business subcultural values and assumptions of the United States of America to the exchange. Jim believes that he can influence the future. He is working diligently in an attempt to meet his contractual obligation and to fulfill his obligation to his employer and his client. Since Jim is striving toward promotion, he is quite concerned that his chances for advancement may be jeopardized by completing the contracted work after the deadline date specified in the contract. If this happens, he knows his superior is likely to hold him accountable for the delays even though he is not necessarily directly responsible for them. Jim shares his concerns with the governmental administrator since he believes Abdul can provide relevant assistance. Jim is attempting to resolve the problems as quickly as he can in an acceptable manner that will result in beneficial change.

2. Abdul brings a number of Middle Eastern business subcultural values and assumptions to the exchange. Abdul believes that whatever happens is the will of God; consequently, he is unconcerned by delays that will keep the contracted work from being completed by the date specified in the contract. During Ramadan, a period of fasting for Muslims, Abdul's priorities are clearly focused on spiritual rather than on worldly matters. He values tradition more than modernization.

3. If Jim had realized the potential effect of conflicting business subcultural values and assumptions prior to the exchange, he might have taken several actions. First, he might have scheduled the meeting either before or after--but not during--Ramadan. Second, he might have expressed his concerns in a manner that is less critical of Middle Eastern business subcultural values and assumptions. Third, he might have pointed out how his concerns would be interpreted from the perspective of the business subculture of the United States of America. Fourth, he might have attempted to negotiate with Abdul to resolve as many problems as possible. Using hindsight, Jim should have anticipated that little progress toward contract completion would be achieved during Ramadan. When the contract completion date was being negotiated, Jim should have made generous time allowances for resolving the difficulties encountered in transacting business in another subculture and should have avoided a contract completion date during or shortly after Ramadan.

4. In a fundamentalist Islamic country, it is desirable at least to minimize and preferably to avoid business exchanges during such times of religious significance as Ramadan. During that religious fast from dawn to dusk for one lunar month each spring, for example, devout Muslims seek to purify their souls by refraining from food, drink, and sexual encounters. In addition to denying physical desires, practicing Muslims refrain from unnecessary meetings

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with others, minimize verbal exchanges, avoid arguments and unsavory language, and shun other undesirable activities. They strive to develop patience, to gain self-control, to promote spirituality, and to feel the presence of God.

Abdul's dialogue suggests that as a devout Muslim, he is preoccupied with religious rather than business matters. Note that he questions the appropriateness of the business meeting in his first sentence while reverently referring to Ramadan. After Abdul hears Jim's impassioned plea for help, Abdul replies primarily in a religious rather than business sense, suggesting the importance that he attaches to strict adherence to the tenets of Islam. The last two sentences may suggest that Abdul is irritated--perhaps even offended--by what he perceives to be an unnecessary and inappropriately timed business meeting since he admonishes Jim to observe the basic practices of Ramadan.

5. Each member of a business subculture needs to be aware of the influence of subcultural values and assumptions on interactions with others and to factor that impact into his or her communication strategy.

6. Each member of a business subculture needs to strive to minimize the conflicting values and assumptions during interactions so that they do not lead to barriers to effective business communication.

Student Reactions to the Teaching Method

Student reaction to the suggested teaching method is quite favorable. Native students report that they have never thought about business subcultures and communication in this manner before; that through the various activities they develop insights regarding how their own business subculture functions; and that they develop insights about communicating effectively with those from other business subcultures. Nonnative students report that the method helps them to understand better not only how and why businesspersons from the United States of America behave as they do but also how to communicate more effectively with them.

In summary, since values and assumptions of business subcultures influence all business communication messages, those values and assumptions should be discussed in business communication and management courses. Teachers can successfully accomplish this in two to three hours of class time by implementing the suggested nine-step method of instruction. The suggested method uses business-related proverbs, maxims, and sayings as devices for developing insights into business subcultural values and assumptions that influence the communication process. By better understanding the values and assumptions of business subcultures, businesspersons from the United States of America can become more effective communicators within and across business

subcultures and full-fledged participants in the increasingly important international marketplace.

Notes

¹Vern Terpstra and Kenneth David, The Cultural Environment of International Business (Cincinnati: South-Western Publishing Co., 1985), 9-10.

²Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran, Managing Cultural Differences (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1979), 44-45.

³Linda McCallister and Constance S. Bates, "Language as a Proxy for the Study of Culturally Based Managerial Values: An Analysis of German and American Expressions," Proceedings of the 51st ABC International Convention (Los Angeles: Association for Business Communication, 1986), 75-76.

⁴For information about characteristics of a variety of business subcultures, see Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran, Managing Cultural Differences (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1979), Bernard M. Bass and P. C. Burger, Assessment of Managers: An International Perspective (New York: The Free Press, 1979), or Robert T. Moran and Philip R. Harris, Managing Cultural Synergy (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1982).

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